

Easter 4

Readings Acts 4 v 5 - 13, 1 John 3 v 16 - end, John 10 v 11 - 18.

This Sunday's gospel reading is the Good Shepherd and dare I propose to write anything about the subject of being a shepherd here in Cumbria, especially now when all the farms are in the midst of lambing!!

Nevertheless I will try. I believe one of the reasons Jesus identified himself as the good shepherd was because the hearers themselves would either be shepherds or they saw shepherds all around them. They knew the difference between a hired hand and a shepherd who had a vested interest in the sheep, and the ones who had a good reputation for keeping a healthy well kept flock. Jesus always talked about things that people knew about or could identify with. For instance the parable of the Good Samaritan, people would have known the Jericho road and its reputation for attacks. Then again we have psalm 23 which traditionally was written by King David the most respected of kings. His listeners would not have been at all surprised at the link between God (Yahweh) as a shepherd and themselves as his sheep. The psalmist speaks through the perspective of being a well loved sheep. "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me by still waters. He restores my soul." He sees the shepherd as provider, protector and restorer, the perfect caregiver.

Of course the shepherd's life style in the picture given by the psalmist and Jesus is very different from a shepherd that we see around us. The biblical shepherd would lead a very nomadic lifestyle by seeking out pasture and water for their sheep from day to day. The sheep would need still pools, which the shepherd either made by cupping their hands, or pools made from rings of stones. Apparently, sheep do not like to drink from fast running water, hence "by still waters". The rod and the staff spoken of in the psalm would be used to tap the rocks as the shepherd led their sheep along rocky ways and steep paths. The sheep would recognise the sound or rhythm of the knocking made by their master. A bit like a knock on a door by a frequent visitor to our home (excluding covid). As the shepherd had a smaller number of sheep, of course there would have been a closer relationship between shepherd and his flock, as Jesus said, "I know my sheep".

This is a very different experience of shepherds and flocks that we see around us, where we see both sheep and lambs in pens and fields living without a shepherd close by. Yet we know that they have been born irrespective of it being day or night, in wind and rain, warmth or frost. The farmer is there seeing over their welfare. We all know it calls for long hours, late nights, hard work and dedication. One cannot work in farming and at the same time hate it. As many farmers have explained, "farming is a calling and you don't do it just for the money." I know there are far easier ways of earning a living.

It matters little too if one is a shepherd at the time of Jesus or today, there will always be a protective nature in shepherding. Jesus was affirming the meaning and the cost

of true love which is expressed in God's love, which is costly and sacrificial. It is not like candy floss pink and fluffy, sweet and sugary but has no substance. In love for the world, Jesus gave his life, which was both in obedience to the Father's will and his own acceptance of that calling. Jesus was not bullied by God into submission but it was in joint agreement with the Father. Yet this sacrificial love was not intended to end with Jesus. The way Jesus loved was always meant to be an example to his followers to imitate and take on themselves. To show sacrificial love to others was to be the way forward for the new church to bear witness to the love of God. One of the other readings, which is 1 John, chapter 3, sets out how the church should be, but not only the church but each member of it. That is the commandment of God, that we should love one another, but not just in word but in deed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it both beautifully and significantly by saying, "There is no such thing as cheap grace." We are both loved and saved by God, but it is in response to that love that we need to show that love to others. As 1 John, verse 17 says, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees their brother or sister in need and does nothing?"

Surely, if we take that to its ultimate end, it would mean a change in society, and the way we are open to others. It is that sentiment that has driven countless people through the ages to serve others by responding to an injustice or need they have encountered. People such as Elizabeth Fry in the nineteenth century, who worked for prison reform and those who were suffering in mental asylums. Or Wilberforce and others campaigning against the slave trade. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it meant going back to Germany when he was safe in America, to stand against the evil of Hitler and the Nazi regime. For us, it may be standing up and speaking out for what we believe in, or responding when we see a need in our time and place. For instance the covid crisis in India, the homeless in our own country, or our obligation to climate change. I truly believe if the church is to be relevant, it must continue to act and react when there is need. Our faith should be our driving force under the grace of God.

Slowly we may emerge from the lockdown, but there will still be hurt and uncertainty. Covid has touched our lives in so many ways, far more than being ill. As I have said many times, there will be much healing to be done, and I believe we already have the tools to aid in that healing. No, we may not be able to help in the economic rebuilding of the nation and our community, but we can help in the rebuilding of confidence, peace and joy in the people around us. We can be present by listening to stories, to get our churches open for opportunities for prayer and meditation and cups of tea. To help rebuild our communities that have become fragmented. When Jesus had a picnic on the beach with his disciples after the resurrection, he gave instructions to Peter to "feed my sheep", perhaps we too should do the same. As a carpenter told a fisherman how to become a shepherd, so perhaps too we must learn to take care of our Lord's sheep, including those who are lost.

God bless you all and keep safe as you venture into the world.

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